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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine whether the writing skills, as measured by the University Writing Requirement (UWR), of Kentucky high school graduates who had participated in Kentucky's Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) writing portfolios had improved in comparison with their peers in the past who had not done the writing portfolios. The UWR is one of Eastern Kentucky University's standards for graduation. The objectives were to compare the UWR scores of pre- and post-Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) students and to determine the significance of the difference. Researchers randomly selected 50 UWR essays written by Kentucky high school graduates in response to a prompt, Spectator Sport, given in fall 1989 (pre-KERA). The same number of essays responding to the same prompt given in summer 1997 (post-KERA) were also selected. A copy was made of each of the 100 essays to mask the effects of aging and to make the physical appearance of all the essays similar. Four UWR trained and experienced readers were asked to score the essays, and each essay was scored by two readers. The means of the essays in pre-KERA and post-KERA groups were computed and subjected to t-tests to determine the significance of the difference. No significant difference was found at any level between the means of the two groups. (SLD)

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Pre-and Post KERA Students' Writing Skills - A Comparative Study

paper presented

by

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ABSTRACT

In 1989, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) implemented the University Writing Requirement (UWR) as one of EKU's standards for graduation. The Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA) was passed in 1990. The center piece of KERA was educational accountability which is measured through a comprehensive assessment system now known as the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). One component of this accountability system has been the writing portfolio. Since 1991 all fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders in Kentucky's public schools have been required to do the writing portfolio.

This study was conducted to determine whether the writing skills, as measured by the UWR, of Kentucky high school graduates who underwent the CATS writing portfolios had improved as compared to their peers in the past who did not do the writing portfolios. Specifically, the objectives were to (a) compare the UWR scores of Pre-and post KERA students, and (b) determine the significance of the difference.

The researchers randomly selected 50 UWR essays written by Kentucky's high school graduates on a prompt, Spectators Sport, given in Fall 1989 (Pre-KERA). The same number of essays on the same prompt given in Summer 1997 (post KERA) were also randomly selected. A copy of each of the 100 essays was made to mask the effects of aging and to make all the essays look exactly alike in their physical appearance. Four UWR trained and experienced readers were asked to score the essays. Each essay was scored by two readers.

The means of the essays in the pre-KERA and post-KERA groups were computed and subjected to t tests to determine the significance of the difference. No significant difference was found at any level between the means of the two groups.

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 created a nation-wide interest in improving education at all levels. This report contributed to a variety of efforts directed to reform education in the country. The Holmes Group and the Carnegie Foundation proposed different conceptual and theoretical models of education. Subsequently, some colleges and departments of education across the country underwent organizational and/or curricular changes.

At Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), a small group of faculty members, concerned about the poor communication skills of the students, formed a committee. After a few years of deliberations, this group, called the University Writing Requirement Committee, proposed a University Writing Requirement (UWR) for all EKU students seeking a baccalaureate degree. The proposal was approved by the appropriate authorities of the university. It was implemented in 1989. All undergraduate degree students at Eastern Kentucky University are now required to pass the University Writing Requirement (UWR).

The UWR is administered each semester including summer. Students are required to take the UWR in the first semester following completion of 60 credit hours of course work. Transfer students who transfer 60 credit hours or more must take the exam in the first semester of enrollment. Students who fail the first attempt may retake the exam and continue taking courses in the following semester(s) under certain conditions. (A complete copy of the UWR policy is contained in Table1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The UWR consists of an essay written by the students on a prompt, which is created or selected by the UWR Committee. Occasionally a prompt is repeated. Students are given a four-page booklet with the prompt already printed on it. They are to identify themselves on the booklets only by their social security numbers. Students have an hour to write the essay. The essays are scored, according to a seven point rubric which is presented in Table 2, by a group of faculty members who have been trained in holistic scoring. Each essay is read by the first reader who records the score on the essay booklet. A secretary collects the booklets as they are read and blocks the scores. The booklets are then given to the second reader who records the scores on them. Each essay is scored by at least two readers and occasionally by a third reader when the scores given by the first two readers are not contiguous. Two readers' scores are added and are recorded on the booklets as the final scores. When an essay is read by three readers the average of the scores is computed and multiplied by two. The total is recorded as the final score.

Insert Table 2 about here

The deliberations of UWR Committee and the implementation of UWR at EKU coincided with a major event in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. In November, 1985, a complaint was filed by 11 school districts in the Franklin Circuit Court in Kentucky challenging the equity and adequacy of funds provided to individual school districts by the Commonwealth. The "Circuit Court issued a judgment in October, 1988, stating that the General Assembly had failed to provide

an efficient system of common schools, and that the system of school financing was inefficient, in the constitutional sense, and discriminatory." (KDE, 1994)

"On appeal, the Kentucky Supreme Court issued an opinion in June, 1989, which held that the system of common schools in Kentucky was unconstitutional." (KDE, 1994) In response to the ruling of the highest court in the Commonwealth, the General Assembly embarked on restructuring the entire public education system in Kentucky. It appointed a Task Force on Education Reform in July, 1989, composed of the leadership of the House and Senate and appointees of the governor. The recommendations of the Task Force resulted in House Bill 940, which was approved by the 1990 General Assembly. The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was signed by the governor on April 11, 1990.

One of the key provisions of KERA is accountability. A testing program, Kentucky Instructional Retrieval Information System (KIRIS), made up of subject matter tests, performance events, and portfolios (including the writing portfolio) were administered to students in the fourth, eight, and twelfth grades during 1991-1992 school year to determine baseline data. "Portfolios occupied a key place in KIRIS, both as a means of assessment that directly tapped student work in classrooms, schools, and districts. Since the contents of the portfolios arose from student's classroom work, the portfolio was the assessment component that most clearly reflected local curriculum and instruction." (KDE, 2000) The statewide testing program, now known as the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS), continues to be administered each year and is used for rewards and sanctions awarded to schools across the commonwealth. The Writing Portfolio is now assessed in grades 4, 7, and 12.

The Writing Portfolio, designed by a committee of Kentucky English/Language Arts educators, consists of a collection of students' written products in broad categories:

- Personal experience writing;
- Imaginative writing;
- Reflective writing;
- Trans-active writing for real-world purposes and audiences.

The Writing Portfolios are scored locally by school teachers who have been provided extensive training in portfolio scoring. Six criteria are applied holistically to produce a single final judgment which is Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, or Distinguish. The six criteria are:

- Purpose/Audience Awareness
- Idea development/Support;
- Organization;
- Sentence Structure and Variety;
- Language (Word Choice and Usage); and,
- Correctness (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).

The statewide assessment system in Kentucky is designed to measure the schools' success in the attainment of Kentucky's Academic Expectations. One of the Academic Expectations is that all students should write for multiple purposes in multiple forms for a variety of audiences. The Writing Portfolio is calculated to assess this Expectation.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to compare the writing skills, as measured by UWR, of Kentucky high school graduates who had gone through CATS writing portfolio (post-KERA) with their peers prior to the implementation of KERA. Specifically, the objectives were to (a) compare the UWR scores of pre-and post KERA students, and (b) determine the significance of the difference. The null hypothesis was that there was no difference between the mean UWR scores of the two groups of students.

Methodology

The researchers reviewed the UWR records to find a prompt which was used prior to the enactment of KERA and which was repeated a few years after KERA. They found that Spectator Sports (copy of the complete prompt is presented in Table 3) was used in Fall 1989 and again in Spring of 1997. It was believed that the 1997 group of students included Kentucky high school graduates who had completed the KERA writing portfolio in the twelfth grade. The researchers went to the university archives and pulled out the UWR booklets, essays written by students in Fall 1989 and Spring 1997. The 1989 group was designated as pre-KERA and the 1997 group was designated as post-KERA.

Insert Table 3 about here

The researchers identified the social security numbers of Kentucky students and separated their essay booklets from the total number of booklets for both years, 1989 and 1997. Of these, 50 booklets were randomly selected from each group. The social security numbers were recorded on a data sheet for each of the two groups separately. The scores recorded on each essay booklet and the dates were blocked. The booklets of the two groups were mixed together and a photo-copy of each booklet was made in order to eliminate the effect of aging on the booklets and to make them appear exactly alike.

A research grant was submitted to the University for paying the readers. Pending approval of the grant, the researchers decided on the date of the scoring session and invited all the UWR readers to volunteer. They were informed that this reading was for a research study and that they may get paid contingent on the funding of the grant by the university. Six of them did. A scoring session was held on May 6, 2000, and six faculty members (excluding the researchers) read and scored the essays. Each essay was read by two readers, as is routinely done at UWR. No essay had to be read by a third reader. The score assigned to an essay by the first reader was blocked, just as is done at all regular UWR readings, before it was given to the second reader. The readers were not told the details of the research or its design until after the reading had been completed.

The researchers added the scores given to each essay and computed the average of the scores given by the two readers just as it is done at regular UWR. The essays of the1989 and 1997 groups were separated according to the social security numbers which had been recorded on the data sheet prior to mixing the two groups.

Data Analysis

The scores for both years were analyzed using statistical software. Summary statistics forthe pre-KERA and post-KERA scores are given in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

A two-sample t-test to compare the means for 1989 and 1997 was performed. The results are summarized in Table 5. No significant difference between the means was found; the *p*-value of 0.48 is very large.

Insert Table 5 about here

A 95% confidence interval for $\mu_{pre} - \mu_{post}$ is even more informative: (-0.40, 0.84). Since it can be said with 95% confidence that $\mu_{pre} - \mu_{post}$ is between -0.40 and 0.84, it is clear that the two population means are likely to be very close, possibly even equal to each other.

Discussion

Accountability is the center piece of Kentucky's educational reform. According to KERA, "Successful schools will receive monetary rewards from the State; unsuccessful schools will be required to develop plans for improvement. If a school's student performance declines significantly, it may be declared a school in crisis. Students attending schools in crisis may transfer to more successful schools and distinguished educators will be assigned to assist schools needing to improve.

These schools will develop an improvement plan and qualify for implementation funds from the Commonwealth School Improvement Fund." (KRS 158.6455; 158.782; 158.805)
The CATS assessment is taken extremely seriously by every school in Kentucky because of the high stakes attached to it. Teachers spend an inordinate amount of time assisting the students write and rewrite their portfolio entries. Students are stressed out because of the demands made of them to do their Writing Portfolios well.

Given the amount of instructional time spent on the Writing Portfolios, the results of this study were surprising to the researchers. Some factors may account for these surprising results. Grade level students write their portfolio entries on topics of their own choice. They have no time limit to write these entries. They have access to the spell check, grammar check, thesaurus, etc. They write their portfolio entries in their own natural classroom or home environment. They receive unlimited help from their peers, parents, and teachers in writing their portfolio entries. On the other hand, the UWR is highly structured. Students are required to write an essay on a given prompt. They also have a one-hour time limit. It is possible that under these structured circumstances they are not able to organize their thoughts and demonstrate their ability to express them in writing adequately.

One goal of KERA was to provide one personal computer per six pupils in every school in the state. Kentucky has not fully met this goal yet but it is leading the nation in the number of

personal computers available in classrooms. It is probable that Kentucky's high school graduates have become totally dependent on technology with regards to their writing mechanics. They have not really learned to write.

The UWR scoring guide is more specific than the criteria applied in portfolio scoring. The Writing Portfolio criteria serve as the standard. It is possible that this standard is not sharp enough to adequately teach writing skills to students. Hence, no difference is seen in the mean UWR scores of pre-and post KERA high school graduates of Kentucky.

Since 1985, Kentucky has had a New Teacher Internship Program. After graduation, during the first year of teaching, all new teachers are observed by a team of three including a teacher educator. The senior author been serving as a teacher educator on the new teacher internship committees every year. As such she spends a lot of time in schools. She reads lesson plans submitted by the new teacher interns. She reads the portfolio required of every new teacher intern. Regularly, she sees new teachers who are not familiar with word usage. They are deficient in applying rules of grammar. She also teaches three graduate courses a semester. And, all of our graduate students are full time teachers. Every semester there are students who make one wonder how they ever passed English 101. Teachers who have not learned the writing skills themselves cannot teach these skills to their students. It is probable that Kentucky students are receiving inappropriate instruction.

The Portfolio Scores of Kentucky students show a steady improvement. These portfolios are scored by their own teachers. The Kentucky Department of Education has provided training to the teachers in portfolio scoring. The department also conducts a limited portfolio audits. The UWR essays are not scored by students' own teachers. This may have some bearing on the results of this study.

Conclusions

From the results of this study, it appears that there are no differences in the writing skills of pre- and post-KERA students, as measured by the UWR. It should be noted that the post-KERA students in the study had completed only the high school writing portfolio. It is assumed that students completing the writing portfolio at the elementary, middle, and high school levels may indeed show improvement in their writing skills. This study needs to be replicated in the future to test this hypothesis.

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